

Rose Red

By

Trude Perkins

"Stop biting your nails! I know you're doing it!" Nina said, the tinny command passing through the phone as if she were glowering in the little sitting room herself.

"I'm not!" Rose lied, looking at her fingers as she paced the floor. Since she couldn't get at her own nails due to the acrylic false ones, she had taken to chewing at the corners, leaving them red and sore. "But it's not like I don't want to, Neen! I really like him!"

"Then you need to talk to him. I'm on your side, but you're right, this might change things, and if it's not to be then that's fine. I told Dad you were seeing someone, he says the same!" Nina said, striking a kinder tone.

"Well, of course HE would...!! Why did you even have to tell him?" Rose replied. She had tried to keep the contempt out of her voice but didn't try too hard.

"He loves you too, Rose. He's... just not at the same place as the rest of us. Look, why don't I come over after work. I'll bring pizza! Then you and me are going to sit down and you're going to tell me everything, and we're going to make a plan!"

"I'd like that. I'm just... you know. After the Keith thing..." Rose said. A wave of unpleasant memories, ever present in the peripheries of Rose's mind started rising, unbidden, unwelcome...

"Stop it! We're not even saying that name! Nothing like that is ever going to happen again, I'm not going to let it! Do you hear me??"

"Alright, alright!" Rose said, smiling. "Are you staying over?" she asked.

"I'll say no, but that probably means yes. Have you got wine?"

"Always!"

"Have you got decent wine?"

"Uhhh..."

"I'll bring wine. I'll see you at about seven. I love you, sis!" Nina said.

After hanging up the phone, Rose let herself relax with relief. She needed Nina. She needed someone who understood, she needed counsel, she needed someone that would be blunt and tell her what she might not want to hear. She needed her sister.

Rose had casually mentioned Howie to Nina a few days ago, very deliberately just as Nina was getting on a plane, returning from her business trip. Cowardice on her part, probably, because at that point she didn't want to hear Nina's coolheaded reason, lost as she was in her starry infatuation for the man she'd been speaking to for weeks and met twice.

But now that the third date was looming, things were getting frighteningly real.

Rose sat at her laptop and brought up the coding platform, lying to herself that she was going to get some work done when she knew she wasn't. She picked up her phone on impulse and started scrawling through Howie's Instagram. He'd posted a new picture up, one of him posing on a country lane with a cycling helmet on. The caption read "BACK ON THE ROAD AGAIN". Rose hit the little heart 'Like' button.

Rose scrolled back, back, back through Howie's older photos. He looked younger then, with a full head of hair. There were lots of pictures of his daughters as children and a dog that looked like a red setter. There was a picture of him and his wife, faces close together. A selfie. She was pretty. They looked happy, in love...

Rose frowned and put the phone down, staring at the laptop screen. There was a blatant coding error she noticed straight away. She edited it, but then saw that the initial error was part of a chain. She lazily corrected it systematically, taking her time without any real enthusiasm.

A year.

She had to wait a year.

In a year, none of this would matter. Because The Problem would be solved, The Mistake corrected. Would Howie wait a year...?

Her phone buzzed.

It was a text. From Howie.

WHERE YOU WANT TO GO 2MRROW? ILL BOOK TABLE

Rose stared at it. Her first impulse was to answer straight away, but she wanted to talk to Nina first.

LET ME LOOK AT PLACES, I'LL TELL YOU LATER

No, that was too obtuse. She deleted the message.

LET ME LOOK AT PLACES, I'LL LET YOU KNOW IN A COUPLE OF HOURS

Hmm. Was that rude??

I'M REALLY SNOWED UNDER WITH WORK RIGHT NOW, BUT LET ME HAVE A LOOK IN A BIT, I CAN BOOK US SOMEWHERE NICE IF YOU LIKE

Rose clicked 'Send'.

A few moments later, Howie replied.

SOUNDS GRT, LET ME KNOW, CANT WAIT!!!!

That was good. She'd bought herself some time to talk to Nina and figure something out. Somewhere public, but not too public. Somewhere quiet, but not too quiet. This date needed to be carefully planned, especially after what happened with...

No, Nina was right. That man didn't deserve a name, and he wasn't allowed to live in her head. Rose looked out the window. The late afternoon sun looked warm and inviting. It was nearly four, a couple of hours before Nina got here.

Rose pulled on her sweats and training shoes, and plugged her earphones in.

After an hour and a half, Rose let herself back into her little flat, collapsing on the couch, sweating and breathing hard. She kicked off her shoes.

Rose had never bothered about fitness before, being blessed with a short and naturally skinny frame. The operation was going to take a lot out of her, they'd told her, and she needed to be as fit as possible. They'd warned her the hormones were going to challenge her body in different ways, and casually suggested getting into a good fitness regime. Rose had taken that ball and run with it hard, and now could honestly say she was in the best shape of her life. The hormones were distributing her fat differently, she could tell by the beautifully developing curves complimenting her toned muscle.

After getting a long drink and showering, she pulled on some nicer, cleaner sweats and was snoozing on the couch when Nina let herself in, carrying a stack of three pizza boxes and a bottle.

"How many people are coming round, Nina?" Rose asked quizzically, looking at the boxes.

"Well, I forgot to ask what you wanted!" Nina said, setting the boxes down on the coffee table and taking two large glasses from the kitchen.

"Right, spill!!" Nina demanded with a grin as she poured the wine. "I want to know everything!"

"Well..." Rose began. "His name is Howie, he's a physiotherapist..."

"Ooh! Good with his hands, is he??" Nina said with a wicked grin.

Rose shot her a look of mock disdain.

"...as I was saying, he's a physiotherapist, he's got his own practice. He's only just moved here."

"Let me see him!" Nina demanded, shuffling over.

Rose smiled and pulled up a couple of selfies he'd sent, plus a couple of pictures she'd lifted from his social media. Nina took the phone.

"Handsome! How old is he?"

"Err... 42!" Rose admitted.

"What?? That's almost as old as Dad!"

"Shut up, no it isn't!"

"Has he sent a dick pic?" Nina asked, rapidly flipping through the photo album on Rose's phone.

"NO HE HASN'T!" Rose started with an outraged grin, snatching her phone back. "He's a gentleman!!"

"Does he have kids? Wait - he's not married, is he?"

"Divorced. He's got two daughters, one 13, one 16."

"Have you met them?"

"I've only met him in person twice!"

"Alright, how did you meet him?"

Rose took a sip and recounted the tale, how a friend of a friend knew him and how he was moving to the city and setting up his new second branch of his business. Rose had been sub-contracted to write an interface between his old, outdated IT system and the newer one he'd bought, which had meant multiple emails, and then phone calls, then Zoom calls. When he moved to the city, they'd met for a very quick coffee and then a very quick lunch in a sandwich shop. It wasn't exactly high romance.

"But this is different. It's dinner!" Rose said. "The IT work's all done. I think this is DINNER dinner!"

"I think that's probably exactly what it is. It sounds like you two are getting along very well indeed...!"

Rose blushed and smiled.

"Yeah, we kinda are!" Rose said, shyly.

"So... have you talked about relationship stuff?" Nina asked.

"Well... sort of. Yes. No. Not really. Kind of. I don't know!"

"You don't know?"

"I mean, I didn't want to rush into anything, but he sounded interested!"

"Right. Let me investigate! What's his Insta name? Facebook? Twitter...?"

Rose ran through Howie's social media profiles, commenting to Rose on various pictures and posts.

"Ooh! Look at this! Last year he retweeted a petition to make puberty blockers available to under 16's!" Nina said, passing her phone to Rose.

"Really? Oh! I didn't even see that!" Rose said, passing Nina's phone back. "That's a good sign then, right?"

"I'd say so. Hmm - he's liked a lot of human rights posts... THERE! Look at that!" Nina said, holding up her phone triumphantly. It was buried at the bottom of a twitter post full of hashtags, but the bottom one, highlighted in blue was [#TransRightsAreHumanRights](#).

Rose grinned happily.

"How do you even find these? I thought I'd been through his social media!" Rose said.

"Because you're not looking in the right places. He posted this is on his daughter's Instagram. Someone was being a dick, he was pushing back on them."

"Why are you on his daughters Insta? That's creepy!" Rose said, suddenly alarmed.

"No, Rose, it's sensible. We have to be sure!" Nina said, her face suddenly serious.

"Don't follow her or do anything like that!" Rose said, paling.

"Of course not. Look, everything looks good so far, but Rose, listen to me. Just because he's posted some stuff in support, it doesn't automatically follow that that's what he's looking for in a relationship." Nina said.

"I know that, Neen. God, I know that!"

"Yes, I suppose you do. So where are you going for dinner?"

"I don't know. I was going to book somewhere tonight." Rose said.

"OK. What does he like to eat?"

"Oh! I'm not sure!"

"Alright. Does he have any allergies? Is he vegetarian? Vegan...?"

"Err... I'm not sure!"

"You've been talking to this guy for weeks! How do you not know that? What have you been talking about?"

"Oh, you know. This and that!"

"Right. I'm going to be there!" Nina said, with a tone that suggested finality.

"Umm... I was hoping this was going to be a bit more romantic than that...!"

"Not sitting with you, dummy! We'll book a place with a bar. I'll sit there, so if you need to get out in a hurry, then we can get you out quickly."

Rose's mind leapt back to that night, when Keith...

"I'd really like that Nina. Thank you!" Rose said quickly, forcing her mind back to the present.

"Looking after little sisters is what big sisters do!" Nina said, giving Rose a hug.

Rose felt herself tearing up.

"Right!" Nina said. "Let's find somewhere with a bar and a vegan menu just in case, and then we're going to sort out what you're going to wear!"

The restaurant was mid-range, part of a chain, but a decent one. The décor was nice but identical to three other ones Rose had been in. She stood at the reception desk until a young man with a man-bun greeted her.

"Hi there, I've got a table booked for seven?"

The man-bun man looked at a computer screen and tapped it a couple of times.

"For seven people?" he asked, without looking up from his screen.

"No, at seven!"

Man-bun Man looked at his watch.

"Oh, right! What's the name?"

"Bond" Rose replied. It wasn't her name, but Rose couldn't be bothered trying to get people to spell or pronounce 'Kowalczyk' properly when booking anything if she could help it. "Bond" usually got a smile or a comment, but Man-bun Man was non-plussed. He tapped the screen again.

"Table for two, was it?" he asked.

"Yes..." Rose replied, sweeping the room. Nina was sitting at the bar as arranged, sipping on something in a long glass. Rose smiled at her. Howie wasn't here yet.

"Alright, this way!"

Man-bun Man picked two menus from a pile and strode off with purpose. Rose followed. When they got to the table, Man-bun Man flipped into waiter mode and flashed a cheery smile.

"Can I get you some drinks?" he asked.

"Some tap water? We'll order drinks when my friend gets here."

"Of course. Let me know if you need anything..." Man-bun said, before leaving.

Rose forced what she hoped was a casual smile and looked at the menu. Her anxiety levels, which were already high were creeping up and starting to peak. She wanted to get up and speak to Nina, but she looked at her watch. Howie would be here any second now.

She squirmed on the leatherette seat as she felt her dress riding up. She'd bought it in a sale months ago, not really intending to wear it. Well, maybe after The Mistake was sorted. It was made of fine figure-hugging wool, sleeveless with a big turtleneck top, but only came down mid-thigh. It was more like a big fitted woolly-jumper, but Nina insisted that it looked stunning on her. She had a pair of nice heels that would have went well with it, but, with a wholly unspoken understanding, Rose and Nina settled on a pair of flat shoes.

Man-Bun left a pitcher of water with some ice and lemon, and Rose poured some and sipped at it. There were three lemon pips in the water. The pepper grinder was nearly empty. She glanced at her watch. He wasn't late yet. There was a small tear in the corner of the vinyl tablecloth. How did it become ripped? There was a story there...

Rose looked up. Howie was there, beaming a smile. He was carrying a bunch of flowers. Oh god. He came!

Rose stood up, halfway through the manoeuvre wondering why she'd done that, and Howie gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Wow! Are these for me?" Rose asked.

"Yes. Do you like them? I was wondering if it was a bit much..."

"No, they're lovely, thank you!" Rose replied, sitting back down.

Man-Bun appeared again, flashing his best I-Smell-A-Good-Tip-Here smile. Howie ordered a bottle of wine with smooth confidence - mid-range red, after Rose nodded her agreement. When Man-Bun brought it and poured a small sample, Howie sniffed it and peered at it and without tasting it, nodded approval.

"I like this place! I've driven past it a few times but never been inside!" Howie said.

Rose's mind raced. Oh god, had she brought him to a low-rent dive bar? Was he used to finer things? Against her will, she shot a look to Nina, who was still sitting at the bar, pointedly not looking at them. Rose realised there was a mirror behind the bar. She felt reassured.

"Neither have I. It's quite nice. Have you had a look at the menu?"

"Hmm..." Howie said, his brow furrowing as he opened the faux-leather document. "I haven't eaten all day! What are you having?"

Rose had already picked the lasagne whilst anxiously waiting to see if Howie was even going to come, but she tapped her chin in performative indecision.

"I don't know. It all looks nice. How was work?"

"Good! It's all coming together now."

"And is the IT all working?"

"Yes! Oh - actually, there's a missing toolbar thing. I accidentally switched it off and I can't get it back. But we don't need to worry about that just now!"

"Ah, you probably need admin rights to reconfigure it, I'll sort that for you tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow, yes! We won't worry about that tonight! For now, a toast!" Howie said, raising his glass.

"What are we drinking to?" Rose asked.

"The future." Howie said.

Rose smiled tightly and raised her glass. This was it. The future. He's talking about 'the future'. The future of his company? His IT system? The missing toolbar...?

Or did he mean the future he was imagining with Rose?

Rose looked over at Nina. Nina looked back.

Rose's mind raced, her heart thumped BOOMBOOMBOOMBOOM. She had thought of little else but this moment recently, and now that it was here, she realised that she hadn't made any actual plan, aside from calculating possible outcomes based on expected parameters of thought and action and...

Right, time was a factor now. This would have to be handled tactfully. If she spent too long before telling him then he might accuse her of being untruthful, too soon and it might skewer any chance of Howie getting to know her before making his mind up, but if he was going to reject her anyway, then maybe this was the point, but...

"I'M TRANS!" Rose squeaked.

"Pardon?" Howie said, still holding his glass up.

"I said I'm trans! A trans woman! A woman that's trans!"

Howie looked confused for a second.

"Umm... yes. I know!"

"Oh!" Rose said, suddenly lost for words. She stared for a couple of seconds.

"You do? Huh! I thought I passed! I haven't been misgendered in months!" she said, finding her words again.

"Well, I mean, you do? I guess? I wasn't sure at first..."

"You've known all this time??"

"Well..."

"OH MY GOD, do you know how much I've been worrying about this?" Rose said, exasperated.

"I'm... sorry...?"

Rose's suspicions started to rise, then suddenly lurched upwards.

"Wait a minute! Are you a Chaser?"

"A what?"

"A Chaser!"

Howie looked genuinely confused.

"I don't know what that is!" he said.

"A fetishist. A creep that fetishises trans women, because I am NOT OK with that!"

Howie looked aghast.

"What? No! Of course not!"

Rose's mind was still racing, caught up in the adrenaline-infused high of fight-or-flight. She suddenly couldn't think of anything to say, but her face was obviously frozen because Howie was looking back at her with a look of confused concern.

"Have I done something wrong?" he asked.

"I... no! I'm sorry."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. I think so...!"

"So what's going on?"

Rose took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down.

"I was worried that you didn't know. I was worried that you might have thought I'd been lying to you. I was worried that you might..."

The words froze in Rose's throat.

"Might what...?" Howie asked.

"...be angry." Rose replied.

"Why would I be angry?"

"I don't know." Rose replied.

"Did you think I was going to hurt you?" Howie asked. His voice was soft, his tone one of concern, not accusation.

Rose's mind leapt back to that night. The hatred on Keith's face. The blood. The stark fluorescent ceiling lights of the hospital...

"I don't know...!"

"I don't want to hurt you, Rose, God no! I just thought we'd have dinner, maybe get to know each other a bit better. I'm not sure what's happening here, but if you're uncomfortable..."

"No!" Rose said, suddenly panicked. "Please, I'm sorry. I was just really nervous and I was worried you might think less of me, and I really like you, and..."

And... Rose realised what she'd just said. Out loud.

Howie smiled warmly. He reached over and took Rose's slim hand into his large, rough one and gave it a gentle, tender squeeze.

"I really like you too, Rose. I'd still like to get to know you better, if you like."

Rose felt herself tearing up, the emotional high of her adrenaline spike giving way to a nervous, exhausted surge of happiness. She felt a tear running down her face, quickly wiping it with the back of her hand.

She looked to Nina and nodded, still holding Howie's hand. Nina was tearing up too. She covered her mouth then started clapping her hands.

Suddenly, people were applauding everywhere. Rose looked round. At least two dozen women scattered around the restaurant, clapping their hands.

Rose and Howie looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Umm... would you excuse me for a moment?" Rose said, frowning with confusion at the applauding crowd. She quickly scurried over to Nina.

"What's going on?" Rose asked Nina, who was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"These guys? Oh! I forgot to say. I told the girls at my kickboxing club what happened with Keith, and I told them you were meeting someone tonight aaaaand... they all wanted to come. All of them. You know, for moral supp..."

Rose flung her arms around Nina, hugging her tight and bursting into tears. When she let Nina go, Nina was crying too.

"I love you, Neen!"

"I love you too, Rose. Now quick! Get back to him before he runs away with another gorgeous girl!"

Rose floated back to the table, smiling through her happy tears. Howie was obviously no fool and had clearly realised exactly what was happening.

"And that is...?" Howie asked, motioning to the bar.

"My sister!" Rose answered. She looked round. Nina was raising a glass to Howie. He raised his wineglass back in return.

"So... we're good?" he asked, smiling.

"Very good!" Rose replied, smiling back.

Howie picked up the menu.

"Good! Now. I think I'll have the lasagne..."

FIN